

# Marrying A Social Justice Approach With Human Development

 [verfassungsblog.de/marrying-a-social-justice-approach-with-human-development-2/](http://verfassungsblog.de/marrying-a-social-justice-approach-with-human-development-2/)

Maximilian Steinbeis So 6 Jan 2013

So 6 Jan  
2013

Can a theory of justice become an impetus for an approach to development, which could be practically implemented? What should be the nature of a theory of justice and the basis of distribution if it is to be employed for development needs? These were the issues that were recently debated at the [workshop on Justice and Development](#) organized by the [Centre for Advanced Studies Justitia Amplificata](#) in Frankfurt Germany. The capability approach, developed by economist and philosopher Amartya Sen was at the centre of the discussion at the workshop. Sen developed his approach to human development, known as the capability approach, primarily as an evaluative framework to measure choice-based development in the lives of individuals. His capability approach emerged as a critique to the traditional idea of evaluating development in terms of happiness or access to resources and commodities. Sen argues that it is a mistake to measure development in terms of happiness (desire fulfilment) or availability of commodities. Individuals could be happy even under precarious conditions if they have adjusted their expectations with their vulnerable conditions. On the other hand, mere availability of commodities cannot be important in peoples' lives unless those commodities could improve their conditions.

Sen defines development as freedom *to do* or *to be* as an individual wishes. What follows is that social, economic, political, cultural, environmental factors need to create appropriate conditions in which individuals can achieve their aspirations. Philosopher [Martha Nussbaum](#) develops the capability approach in order to formulate a social justice theory. Drawing on Aristotle, Nussbaum notes that the individual capabilities are the source of a good human life worth living (*eudaimonia*). Nussbaum argues that social factors for capability enhancement need to be institutionalized in the constitution of a democratic polity. Providing a basic list of desirable capabilities, she asserts that her provisional list of capabilities is necessary for a good human life in all societies. Nussbaum's list has been criticised as being paternalistic and disrespectful to the democratic participation and dialogue process. However, to be fair to Nussbaum, her framework does provide enough scope of democratic participation and dialogue.

Democratic participation and dialogue has traditionally been absent from the development approaches of the international financial institutions and development practitioners. A perusal of the history of development approaches reveal that the development project was envisaged as a dichotomy between traditional and modern (or *them* versus *us*, if you please). As per these approaches, development is the process of modernising the periphery upon the model of the Western center. Such modernization project still vitiates the work of the international financial and (development) funding agencies. What has been absent from the development practice is the integration and social dialogue with the beneficiaries of development. The *Justitia Amplificata* workshop brought this necessity of social dialogue to the fore by inviting opinion from development scholars and practitioners.

Development scholars pointed out that if enhancement of capabilities should be the normative goal of development, development planning could be envisaged in two mutually distinct ways. First of these two ways is to determine the factors or resources that are necessary for the enhancement of capabilities for a particular society through moral argument. Once these factors are identified by planners of development, development programs need to ensure these capability-enhancing factors – a top down approach. The second way would be to leave the decision-making process about necessary factors to the democratic deliberation process in the target jurisdiction – a bottom up approach. Sen's *idea of justice* reserves a preeminent role for public participation and democratic deliberation. Sen notes that the idea of social justice cannot be static – it needs to modify itself with the changing nature of divergent societies. He asserts, once established, institutions alone cannot ensure human development and social justice. Role of institutions need to be evaluated continuously; old institutions discarded and newer ones added for the promotion of justice and development through the democratic dialogue process involving stakeholders. Through this

dialogue process democratic societies determine their own course of development as responsible agents. Nussbaum too thinks that democratic dialogue and participation is important for the justice and development project.

These two approaches also underline the work of the NGOs and development practitioners that participated in the workshop. What emerged out of the development practice of different funding agencies (including NGOs) is that even though the agencies prefer to outline necessary development factors for a particular society through their board-decisions, some of them also devise a mechanism for incorporating opinion from target societies. A mix of these mechanisms characterizes Nussbaum's work on capability-based conceptualization of justice. It was only fitting, therefore, that the workshop was centered around a public lecture titled *Development and Human Capabilities: The Contribution of a Philosophical Theory of Justice* delivered by Nussbaum, who called upon the need to integrate the disciplines of economics and philosophy in order to formulate a successful development policy.

*(These reflections are drawn from the different paper presentations at the workshop in Frankfurt, in which the author participated.)*

---

LICENSED UNDER CC BY NC ND

SUGGESTED CITATION Steinbeis, Maximilian: *Marrying A Social Justice Approach With Human Development*, *VerfBlog*, 2013/1/06, <http://verfassungsblog.de/marrying-a-social-justice-approach-with-human-development-2/>.